Peter Tscherkassky

HOW AND WHY

A Few Notes Concerning Production Techniques Employed In the Making of My Darkroom Films

HOW

My very first darkroom film saw the light of the projector in the year 1984 –and in a sense,*Motion Picture (La Sortie des Ouvriers de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon)*mightbe my most radical work to date. To a certain degree, this concept film was the fruit of my primary reading material at the time: Umberto Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics*. Eco isolates particles of darkness and light as fundamental to the photographic (and thus also filmic) code.The tiny, isolated components of this code are equivalent to the phonemes of spoken language,and like thesethey carry no meaning in themselves. It is only in combination with other such meaningless particles that various photographic grey values can add up to something meaningful. With *Motion Picture* I wanted to get down to these elementalbuilding blocks of the cinematographic illusion apparatus, to isolate and connect them in a self-sufficient film, revealing the fundamental illusion code. So I marched into the darkroom and mounted fifty 16 mm strips of unexposed film stock onto the wall, vertically covering a surface of 50 x 80 cm in total.Onto this blank cinematic canvas I projecteda single frame from the first film ever shot for the purpose of cinematic projection, namely *Workers Leaving the LumièreFactory* (1895) by the brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière. I processed the exposed filmstrips andsubsequently arranged them on a light table to form a 50 x 80 cmduplicate of the original Lumière frame.I then edited the filmstrips together, starting with the first strip on the left, and proceeding to the right. The result is a three-minute 16 mm film exhibiting the particles of darkness and light that constitute the original Lumière image, emptied of all figurative content. As Michael Palm put it, "If it were possible to see a code, one might say: here it shows."[1]

With *Motion Picture* I had reached a kind of filmic ground zero. It was not easy to find a way back into the cinematographic space of illusion.It took the pressure ofhaving to writemy PhD dissertation in philosophytomotivate making another film –as a means of escape.After completing *Motion Picture*I had given up my Berlin residence, where I had lived for five years and had started making films.I moved back to Vienna where I wassupposed to write my thesis, entitled "Film and Art – Towards a Critical Aesthetic of Cinematography".But then I descended into what could be called a state of "philosophical performance anxiety".It was in this conditionthat I stole into a darkroom I had originally set up at the age of 14in my parents' house. I was armed with two35 mm advertising films, one for Ergee nylon stockings and the other for car tires (Semperit HiLife M 401),plus a few negative filmstrips of moving

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[1]Palm, Michael. "Liebesfilme. Zu einigen Arbeiten von Peter Tscherkassky." [German] In *Avantgardefilm. Oesterreich 1950 bis heute*. Edited by Alexander Horwath, Lisl Ponger and Gottfried Schlemmer. Vienna: Verlag Wespennest, 1995. See also: http://www.tscherkassky.at/inhalt/txt_ue/01_palm.html

hands I had photographed with a regular still camera. I proceeded to make the film *Manufracture*(1985) in a kind of trance. It took six days working fourteen-hour shifts to complete the film... Despite its kinetic qualities, I regard *Manufracture* as a minor work, but it awakened my pleasure in found footage filmmaking once and for all; it suggested the possibilities of working with the 35 mm still camera as a cine-camera (which would later lead to *Parallel Space: Inter-View*[1988–1992]); and, above all, it opened my eyes to the possibility of doing film art work in the darkroom.

12 years passed before I found my way back into the darkroom, but ever since, all my films have been created in that tiny little red light district: *L'Arrivée* (1997/1998), *Outer Space* (1999), *Dream Work* (2001), *Instructions for a Light and Sound Machine* (2005), *Nachtstück [Nocturne]* (2006), *Coming Attractions (*2010), *The Exquisite Corpus* (2015), and *Train Again* (work in progress). Each of these works is based on found footage. Film originally shot by other filmmakers is elementally reconstituted by interventions I undertake in the darkroom, the material thereby coalescing into a new, autonomous creation. Each of my darkroom films was made by means of an archaic contact copying process. The concrete method I employ can be explained as follows:

I place a strip of unexposed 35 mm film on a piece of cardboard thatmeasures15 by 100 centimeters. The filmstrip itself equals48 frames in length, which comes to two seconds of projection time.
The raw stock I use is orthochromatic – since it isdesensitized to red light, I can work in a darkroom dimly lit by a red bulb. The unexposed film is held in place by small nails with which the cardboard is outfitted. I place one meter of found footage on top of my unexposed film stock. The nails of the cardboard protrude through every fourth perforation hole, so I can keep track of the frame lines: 35 mm film has four perforation holes per film frame, each pair of nails holds one frame in place. Subsequently I copy the found footage onto the raw material by exposing it to light. I have a number of possible light sources at my disposal.I largelyuse customized flashlightsorelse a conventional photographic enlarger. Butthis said,I mainly created the so-called CinemaScope trilogy (*L'Arrivée*, *Outer Space* and *Dream Work*) using a laser pointer to exciseselect portions of individual frames– details I copied, one frame at a time. Thismethod of exposing film stock is reminiscent of painting: I manually guide the laser pointer across the surface of each individual frame,carefully searching for and exposingpre-selected bits and pieces–the tiny beam of light illuminating and rendering these shapes functions as my brush.

After copying detailsfrom48 frames of found footage, I repeat the process several times over again, exposing the same single strip of raw stock to several different strips of found footage. In this way, I can mix details from entirely disparate sequences and each individual frame becomes anintricate optical collage. Parts of *Outer Space*include up to five multiple exposures.

Dream Work consists of sequences involvingup to seven layers.*L'Arrivée*,on the other hand, was produced using a photographic enlarger as my sole light source. I created the collage effect by sandwiching several strips of found footage on top of themeter of raw film stockIthen exposed in one single pass to the cone of light emitted by my enlarger.
Normallyit takes between 50 to 70 minutes to createone meter of multiple exposuresframe by frame. I subsequently develop the film by hand in standard black and white darkroom chemistry and then examine the results on a light table.

I employed a similar process to create the soundtrack for*Outer Space*. The sound of analog film is encoded in the form of an optical soundtrack,a graphically jagged, visual track running along the edge of the film frame. And so it is that a film's soundtrack can be copied and collaged in the same way as its images.I used this technique to full advantage in the case of *Outer Space*: I often selected and copied portions of audio from one part of the original film to accompanya completely differentsequence of my newlyemerging film.
In the case of *L'Arrivée*, I copied the image portion of my source material so that it edged beyond the visible film frame, over to where the soundtrack is supposed to be.The projector's audio systemthereby reads these image fragmentsas sound, making themaudible. (The result is vaguely reminiscent of the Italian Futurists' *intonarumori* or 'noise instruments'.)

My darkroom work is always preceded by a planning phase that is no less intricate and laborious than the darkroom work. I closely study my found material on DVD and virtually get to know it by heart. The elements of individual frames, each shot and every sequence triggers a kind of vocabulary for the new film. Based on this vocabulary, I develop a new story with a dramaturgical structure I set to paper in my notebook.

In a second notebook I map out a precise microstructure for the exposure of each meter of film.This notation work is an absolute necessity, guiding my later steps in the near dark. It resembles a musical score, carefully listing all futuredarkroom interventions. The result is a graphic notation for each filmstrip. If a mistake has occurred in the process of copying my material, I can start the exposure process all over again based on these notations.

WHY

Whether we like it or not, today we arewitnessing the rapid replacement of classic analog film by digital imaging technologies. There seems to be little doubt that it is only a matter of time before the entire production and projection process will be purelydigitalin nature. Should you find yourself in one of the few analog projection booths left, surrounded by clumsy projectors, you already might feel you've stumbled into a kind of Jurassic Park.Giant reels ofheavy film requiring transportation to and from the distributor,and from one theater to the next, nowadays resemble something off a list of endangered species.It may be true that in many

fields of audio-visual communication it does not make a big difference whether images stem from a strip of film or are rendered from a digital medium. However, in all cases where it's about film as an art form, the difference between the two media is absolutely crucial.

This has to do with the etiology of modern art in general. Historically speaking, the different forms of what we term "modern art" have been determined by a process of rationalization that affected society as a whole. The philosophical roots of this process can be found in the Enlightenment, its social origin in the French Revolution, when reason constituted the final determinant of the legitimacy of political power. From an economic perspective, the Modern Age can be considered the result of a rationalization process that laid claim to the world in its technical form, namely industrialization. In the art world, the spread of rationalization was expressed by work that began to reflect its own inner structure, its creative means and possibilities, and what is integral to these: its material. In the history of cinema, classic and contemporary avant-garde films reflect qualities characteristic of film as a material medium, and exploit the specific artistic possibilities film offers.[2]

Regarded from this perspective, one thing becomes clear: Analog film and digital media are in no way interchangeable when it comes to advanced artistic articulation as expressed through movingimages. The materials differ too greatly. It is solely the *effect* theycreate, the illusion of movement they share in common. You could even modestly exaggerateand claim analog and digital media have *nothing* in common, except that both are used to produce moving images. Of coursethis diagnosisshouldby no means be misconstrued as a criticism of the digital medium in itself or doubt as to its artistic potential. I just want to stress the fact that what the individual artist can do with these two media is *radically different*: In one case you have binary data stored on an electronic medium which can be manipulated in all kinds of ways, but itcannot be touched and manipulated directly with human hands; in the other case there is a base with a complexly structured coating of emulsion on which an analog image is created through the interplay of light and chemical processes.

In the long run, should the production of analog film be discontinued, as subject to the law of supply and demand, it would be unprecedented in the annals of history. Up till now, not a single artistic medium has been replaced by the development of a new one. Today it is conceivable that for the first time industry might abandon a fully developed and highly advanced medium.

I see the specific meta-significance of the manual skill and handiwork employed in the production of my films in this context. They were created as artworks that unequivocally demand the use of conventional film stock: producing them in digital form would literally be impossible.

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[2] For a closer description of this process see: Tscherkassky, Peter."The Framework of Modernity. Some concluding remarks on cinema and modernism," in *Film Unframed. A History of Austrian Avant-Garde Cinema* [English]. Edited by Peter Tscherkassky. Vienna: FilmmuseumSynemaPublikationen, 2012, pp. 311–316.

The specific charm of these films appears to result from the combination of extremely precise composition (with regard to the footage chosen and its rearrangement) and the obviously aleatory aspect of the manual production method. Working with a laser pointer or flashlights permits neither precise exposure times nor exact sizing of the image's shape. The result is a constant fluctuation of the image during projection, an ever-present reminder of the manual nature of the production process. These visual fluctuations are joined by the unavoidable presence of dirt, hair, scratches, etc., which become part of the film's overall texture. To make a long story short: *The production process* is inscribed in the very images ofmy darkroom films;this process presents itself in a form that is indebted to a *manual*laboremploying analog material thatcould never be exchanged with any other medium.

It is entirely possible that a niche will be established perpetuating classic analog cinema, and an industry greatly reduced in size will continue the production of analog film stock – even if primarily for purposes of conservation. Itseems to me to be of utmost importance in the dynamic of this turning point in history to point out the *specific artistic* potential offered by a strip of film. Andthe fact that handmade analog films are able to entertain such a wide audience – as is the case with my darkroom films – could be considered an expression of a widespread and intact sensitivity to the unique beauty of classic analog cinematography.

Over 35 years ago I began making films using Super-8 – at the exact same time video became popular as an amateur format. The imminent fate of Super-8was thereby sealed. This perspective upon the future of Super-8 triggered a personal response in the form of a greater sensitivity to the specific characteristics and beauty of my means of artistic expression. My speaking to the special qualities of the analog filmstrip (in writing, during interviews, and on stage) has sometimes provoked the reproach, or at least raised a question about "material fetishism". My response has always been that I aim to create art works that can only be made with film. In other words, if there were nothing other than computers, hard disks and magnetic tape, my art works would simply not come to be. Those who regard this as a fetishizing of material should re-examine their concept of the fetish.

And finally, messing with analog film is a hell of a lot of fun!

Translation: Eve Heller

This essay partly basedon a much shorter text published under the title, "Comment et pourquoi? Quelques remarques sur la réalisation technique de la trilogie CinemaScope," in *Trafic 44 – Revue de Cinéma* (Paris), no. 44 (2002).